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CONCERNING THE ROLE OF FEMALE LABOUR IN THE ECONOMY OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES OF AFRICA

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THE ROLE OF FEMALE LABOUR IN THE ECONOMY OF THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES OF AFRICA

by R. SMIRNOVA

1. The problems of overcoming economic backwardness, raising the living standards of the peoples are now confronting the newly independent countries of Africa.

   One of the main aspects of economic development in Africa is the problem of ensuring a full and most efficient employment of manpower resources.

   Numerous studies carried out recently by specialized UNO organizations as well as by separate scientists made it clear that in the majority of African states a considerable part of the economically active population finds itself outside the sphere of material production, does not find employment and is doomed to hunger and poverty.

   Especially low is the percentage of African women employment. For example in Tanganyika there are only 20,777 women wage earners out of the total number of workers equalling 413,100; in Uganda - 6034 women wage earners out of the total number of workers of 225,729[1]. Women wage earners in the UAR in 1957 amounted to less than 4.3 per cent of the total number of workers in the country, in Senegal - only 6 5 per cent and so on[2].

2. The extremely uneven distribution of female labour between the branches of economy attracts wide attention. The table published by the International Labour Organization in "African Labour Survey" is very illustrative in this respect.

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1. African Labour Survey ILO Geneva, 1958, pages 355 and 667.
2. Seminar on Participation of Women in Public Life. Addis-Abab . UNO. December, 1960. Report of the UAR and Senegal representatives - participants of the seminar.

Table XVIII. Woman Wage earners in the main industries

Territory and year of reference	Agriculture	Mineral extraction	Manufacturing Industry	Building Industry	Transport	Commerce	Domestic service	Public Administration	Total
Ghana (1954)	451	172	500	714	381	410	3,829		6,457
Kenya (1956)	57,577	92	2,726	391	281	2,843	5,482 (I)	10,123	79,511
Nigeria (1953)	922	126	807	50	149	445	142	1,387	4,079
Nyasaland (1956)	1,101	4	1,264	461	13	192	2,053 (II)	-	15,088
Nothern Rhodesia (1956)	1,672	53	205	164	16	72	3,323 (III)	-	5,545
Southern Rhodesia (1956)	29,450	642	2,292	237	27	248	12,324 (IV)	-	44,991
Tanganyika (1955)	17,776	281	475	94	-	389	629 (V)	1,133	20,777
Uganda (1956)	1,889	54	444	14	10	50	3,430	143	6,034

As the table shows female labor is mainly concentrated in agriculture, commerce and the domestic service sphere.

One must bear in mind that the official statistical data does not accurately reflect the actual situation. For instance, the number of women engaged in unproductive labour is much higher than the table shows. The seminar of African women on "Participation of Women in Public Life" organized by the UNO in 1960 [4] pointed out that 2/3 of all African women are engaged in petty retail trade. Only in Lagos according to the 1956 census 32,026 women earning their living by trade. [5] In Ghana 67 per cent of women are engaged in trade.

(I) Including 1,781 in private domestic service.

(II) Including 699 in private domestic service.

(III) Including 1,187 in private domestic service.

(IV) Including 7,994 in private domestic service.

(V) African Labour Survey ILO, Geneva, 1958, p.355.

Such a high percentage of women engaged in trade is especially characteristic of the countries of West Africa.

A high percentage of women engaged in domestic service is characteristic of the East Africa countries where the number of white settlers is rather considerable. Thus in Uganda half of all the women wage earners work as domestic servants [6]. Employment of African women in such unproductive spheres as domestic service and petty retail trade is explained first of all by the economic backwardness of African states in particular by the lack of developed industry. It is necessary to add that a considerable number of African women have low professional skill, inadquate and more often no education at all; this deprives them of many possibilities of applying their energy and abilities. For example, according to the UNO data 548 thousand pupils including 159 thousand girls are studying in primary schools of Kenya, and only 45 girls are studying in higher school [7].

Taking into account the situation which exists in subsistence economies we may say that the bulk of African women comprise unskilled women-workers, servants and housewives. These toilers carry on not only the main part of farming activities, but they bear all the burden of household duties which at (considering the low level of productive forces in these countries) is rather exhausting.

From the point of the national production the labour of this great part of the population yields extremely insignificant result, since their labour is spent not so much on production of material values of society as on satisfaction of immediate requirements of separate families.

It goes without saying that economic development in African countries will bring about definite changes in the ratio of workers engaged in material production and unproductive spheres. But the interests of rapid economy development require purposeful efforts to provide for an overall rise in labour productivity. It is clear that this rise is possible only on the basis of technical progress which is constantly connected with the improvement of professional skills, rational employment of labour resources.

A sound solution of this problem will greatly contribute to a rapid development of the productive forces of African countries, which in its turn will bring about a rise of material and cultural standards of the whole population. New societies can develop successfully only if the employment of every economically active individual is productive, if every member of the society is engaged in definite industrial, handicraft, agricultural or some other activity useful for the country by which he can industriously contribute to the production of material wealth and to the values of society.

Undoubtedly a great contribution to the cause of national economy development, the rebirth of national culture and the raising of the well-

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4 1960 Seminar on participation of women in public life, Addis-Ababa, p. 1, p. 12, UN, December, 1960.

5 Economic Bulletin for Africa. Addis-Ababa.UN, 1961, Vol. 1, N 2, p. 52.

6 Inter-African Labour Institue, Bult III, 1955.

7 Statistical Yearbook, 1959, New York, UN.

being of the peoples may be made by millions and millions of African women if they are drawn into an active participation in the building of the new society.

3. The ways and means of inclusion of women in social production are manifold. For example, a mass unionization of women occupied in a familiar production process. In particular organization of female handicraft groups, cooperative teams may be of great importance.

Considerable experience in this field has accumulated in the Soviet Union and mainly in the republics of central Asia-former colonies and economically backward regions of tzarist Russia. The work of the Soviet government in liberating women from the fetters imposed on them by an absence of rights was very complicated and required great selflessness and effort. Many forms and methods of work aimed at stimulating women's participation in labour activities and raising the productivity of their labour were used. With this purpose special centres to train women in new professions were organized. For example, training centres of women cattle-breeders where women acquired new knowledge and experience in cattle-breeding and farming were of great use. Dairy farms equipped with separators and churns were organized at such centres. At the farms newly arrived peasant-women studied under the guidance of an agronomist. At that time a separator represented "modern technology" in butter and milk production and their inculcation in kishlaks was a great event.

Peasant-women organized so-called conradship associations, collectively bought separators and together produced dairy products. Sewing and fancy-work groups, women and children dispensaries were organized.

In the Turkmen SSR women united in handicraft groups producing famous Turkmen carpets. These groups concluded special contracts with state trade agencies. The Soviet state in every possible way encouraged and supported such women associations by granting credits on advantageous terms, organizing commodity markets and supplying them with raw materials.

Owing to such support the cooperation of female labor in the Central Asia Republics began to developed on a mass scale. In a number of regions women organized farms for the collective cultivation of the soil. These farms were supplied with tractors, besides they received seeds and cash to buy agricultural implements. The main benefit of these farms lay in the fact that they raised considerably the productivity of female labour and became a good basis of technical and vocational training for them.

In the Soviet Union, in the republics of Central Asia women's clubs also enjoyed great popularity. In these clubs not only work eliminating illiteracy among women was carried on, but women were trained in various professions and specialities.

Industrial sections, various workshops, groups such as sewing, weaving and others were organized at the clubs. The groups had not only training program but also fulfilled state orders according to a special plan.

The topic of this report does not make it possible to elucidate in detail all the changes in the status of women in Central Asia which took place during the years of Soviet rule. I want to stress only that the experience of the republics of Central Asia proved that it is quite possible within the life of one generation to radically change the status of women so that from a potential labour force they would become an active, motive power in the building of a new society.

4. The wide introduction of African women into productive activity is a matter for the immediate future. Since a subsistence economy prevails now in the economy of the African countries, women are confined to the family and household. But the times are moving rapidly. Life is changing quickly. The development of national economy, growth of industry will soon undoubtedly bring about a disintigration of subsistence economy. Female labour even now goes beyond the limits of a separate family and in the future will do so even more. Millions and millions of African women will directly participate in ensuring the general economic development of their countries.

With this in view the problem of improving the professional skills of working women in African countries acquires great importance. A great number of women go to work at factories directly from the household, having no industrial experience, no professional skill. Even now the experience of some African states shows that there are a number of ways to solve the problems arising in this connection.

In the first place it may be worth while to organize the systematic admission of youth to vocational schools and training groups at enterprises and to allocate simultainously a definite number of vacancies for girls. It is also possible to organize retraining of grown-up women workers through a system of evening schools and courses. An interesting example in this respect is the suggestion of the National Council of Women of Ghana concerning organization of special centres in the country on technical and vocational education of women and girls.

Ghana is one of those African countries where great attention is paid to the problems of technical education. In the past few years in the country many secondary and higher technical educational establishments engaged in a wide-scale preparation of national specialists is being built. The number of students in these educational establishments from 1950 to 1956 increased threefold and by 1957 it amounted to 3,330 students[8]. Year after year the number of girls among the students increases.

And in other African countries starting to build an independent economy the situation is similar. Guinea, Mali, the UAR already have started to realize wide-scale programs to wiping out illiteracy among adults. Compulsory primary education both for boys and girls is being introduced. It means that the next generation of African women will be educated, and there will be no illiterate women as well as no illiterate men.

In organizing a system of technical and vocational education the correct elaboration of training programs becomes of great importance. But unfortunately the training of women and girls is organized often around occupations traditional for them : cookery, needlework, sewing, housekeeping. The knowledge of these things is undoubtedly useful and necessary. But with only this knowledge it is impossible to solve that serious problem of creating new African cadres, which faces now the young independent African states. But only trained cadres can actively participate in the process of national construction.

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8 Secondary Technical and Vocational Education in Underdeveloped Countries. UNESCO. Educational Studies and documents N 3, 1959, p. 22.

5. The experience of African countries shows that the work on attracting women into productive activities is of great importance. Now when a radical reorganization of the economy as a whole is on the agenda of the African peoples, an efficient employment of the female labour force in the building of a new life becomes a matter of state importance.

The problem of raising the productivity of labour is closely connected not only with increasing the number of working women and improving their professional skill but also with the betterment of living conditions of women workers. It is important to create such conditions under which the self-sufficient individual economy unit becomes gradually substituted by more economic and labour-saving collective economy ones which employ female labour expediently. Therefore it is important that, in the organization of labour those works which must accompany production improvment and reorganing at the mode of life in order to preserve man-power and eliminate the useless and unproductive waste of labour mustbe taken into account. The way to solve this problem lies in the organization of a modern system of community service and well-being.

The attraction of women into social production will be successful only where the state considers it its duty to take upon itself the care not only of the woman-toiler but also of woman-mother.

This concern lies in the fact that the state would not only concern itself with maternity and legal protection of the child but would assume material responsibility for the interests of the mother and child by granting paid maternity leaves, organizing labour protection in undertakings, building various children's institutions and so on.

A part of the above is being put into practise already. National construction in the independent African countries has already attained considerable successes and exerted influence upon all spheres of public life. It exerts serious influence upon the exchange of views as regards the role and importance of female labour in the economy of the developing African countries. Now it is to the highest degree helpful to take into account the experience aquired during these years, to understand the forms which the work of bringing women into social production is taking, in order to find new more perfect ways of solving this problem.

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